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Indo-Americans honor roots

By Jessie Mangaliman
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About 7,000 Indo-Americans from across the United States packed the San Jose Convention Center on Saturday for the colorful conclusion to a national gathering of Telugu speakers, a regional language in southern India.

The three-day conference of the Telugu Association of North America (TANA), drew less than the expected 10,000, but the attendance was still a good showing for a tough economic year, said Jarama Rao Komati, a Bay Area restaurateur who was the convention chair.

“We’re proud to be celebrating our Silver Jubilee in Silicon Valley,” Komati said, referring to the 25th year of the association. An estimated 30,000 Telugus are in the Bay Area, the largest concentration of Indo-Americans from Andhra Pradesh, the southeast Indian state where the language is spoken, and where many of Silicon Valley’s high-tech workers come from.

“Our people are united, respectable, peace-loving,” said Satish Ambatal, a software engineer from Sunnyvale, as he stood in the lobby of the convention center buzzing with activity. Telugu is not only a language, but a culture.

One section of the second-floor lobby was transformed into a walk-through Hindu temple. At the entrance to the main hall, a sign in Telugu read, “*Swagatam*,” or welcome, as hundreds of people attending the convention -- women dressed in their finest embroidered *saris*, men in *kurta* and *pancha*, the long tunics over narrow pants -- streamed into the main hall for lunch.

In one exhibition hall, merchants sold diamonds, emeralds, rubies, gold and wedding *saris*, side by side with a national matrimonial service that matched single Telugu men and women with future mates.

In another hall, sitar players entertained families, while in various meeting rooms, there were business and high-tech seminars, literary readings, religious discussions and a forum on the impact of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, on immigrants in the United States.

Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, who wore a red *bindi*, the red dot between the eye that signifies spirituality, urged about 100 people at the immigrant forum to oppose new government plans included in the proposed Patriot Act II, a set of new national security measures meant to protect the country from terrorism.

“I’m concerned that the Bush administration continues chipping away at our civil liberties,” Honda told the group. “I question their motivation and I also question their judgment.”

Honda said the new measures will further restrict access to public records and make it easy for the government to conduct searches.

Sam Rao, associate editor of TANA 2003, a tabloid newspaper published for the convention, said he wanted to include discussion of immigrants’ rights in forums on social issues at the convention to encourage the Indo-American community to participate in important community issues.

“What I tell people is that projects on a very local level build goodwill,” said Dinesh Sastry, an attorney from Washington, D.C.

“Those activities, giving food or clothing to the homeless, for example, are incredibly valuable because it builds relationships for immigrant communities,” Sastry said.

For Anil Chillarige, coordinator of technology forums, the convention was a chance to showcase the achievement of a proud culture.

Telugus, he said, are doctors, software and hardware engineers, high technology entrepreneurs, people who are proud to be Americans in Silicon Valley, but also proud of their heritage.

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